

RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
CONNECTICUT

COMMITTEES:

AGING

ARMED SERVICES

COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION

JUDICIARY

VETERANS' AFFAIRS, RANKING MEMBER

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 31, 2015

901

706 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

(202) 224-2823
FAX: (202) 224-9673

90 STATE HOUSE SQUARE, TENTH FLOOR
HARTFORD, CT 06103
(860) 258-6940
FAX: (860) 258-6958

915 LAFAYETTE BOULEVARD, ROOM 230
BRIDGEPORT, CT 06604
(203) 330-0598
FAX: (203) 330-0608

<http://blumenthal.senate.gov>

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20240

WCB-
CONNECT
AMERICA
USF-LIFELINE

The Honorable Tom Wheeler
Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, Southwest
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Secretary McDonald and Chairman Wheeler,

I write to urge the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to create coordinated enrollment opportunities for veterans, particularly participants in VA's pension or homeless veterans programs, to easily enroll in the FCC's Lifeline Program. The Lifeline Program has provided telephone access to many low-income Americans for more than 30 years. Data technology is a vital capability for low-income and homeless veterans to improve their daily lives and we have a responsibility to ensure that our men and women who served in uniform are equipped to access their hard-earned benefits. The FCC should move forward with its proposal to expand the Lifeline Program to broadband connections, which will help bring this critical communications infrastructure into the homes of low-income veterans that deserve our help and support.

Both broadband and telecommunications technologies are pivotal to conduct daily activities, pursue job and housing opportunities and stay in touch with family members. Veterans can use the Lifeline Program discount to improve access to the technology that will allow them to contact VA for benefits or medical appointments, or to communicate with potential employers or housing providers. The traditional Lifeline discount specifically enables veterans to utilize VA hotlines, such as the Veterans Crisis Line, the VA Benefits and Help for Homeless Veterans hotlines as well as Department of Defense (DoD) hotlines for services and resources. The proposal to expand the Lifeline program to broadband, would help veterans access affordable quality health care services. With a broadband connection at home, veterans can check their claims status, apply for new benefits, download their health history, or view their military service record utilizing the eBenefits web portal, and apply for employment or housing opportunities through online resources.

I urge FCC and VA to collaborate on outreach efforts to veterans, veterans' and military service organizations, and housing organizations, to widely disseminate information on this

historically successful program, its benefits, and enrollment opportunities for eligible veterans. It is our duty to ensure that veterans with limited or no income are accessing each and every resource they may be eligible for. Many VA pension recipients may also be eligible to participate in the Lifeline Program based on their income levels. Similarly, many homeless veterans participating in the HUD-VASH program and other VA homeless programs may also have limited incomes that would mirror Lifeline eligibility qualifications; making any participating veteran automatically eligible. The fight to end veteran homelessness is still ongoing and we must ensure that we provide as much support as possible in order to ensure housing stability. I encourage FCC and VA to establish a coordinated enrollment system for the Lifeline discount for all veterans participating in VA programs based on qualifying income levels that indicate Lifeline eligibility.

As Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I strongly believe that greater access to Lifeline benefits will provide support for our veterans' population as they transition from the armed services to civilian employment and as they transition from homelessness into housing. I greatly appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to collaborating with both of you to ensure that all veterans are aware of this benefit and are making use of it.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate



OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

November 12, 2015

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate
702 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Blumenthal:

Thank you for your letter concerning the need to facilitate the enrollment of our Nation's veterans in the Lifeline program. The Commission recognizes the valuable role the Lifeline program can play in veterans' lives, particularly as they transition from the armed services to civilian employment. As you state, the Lifeline program has been helping veterans stay connected for over 30 years, and I share your interest in coordinating outreach efforts and creating coordinated enrollment opportunities to ease burdens on participants in the program and to coordinate outreach efforts to assist veterans who need Lifeline service to manage their day-to-day lives.

In your letter, you detail the importance of data technology as a vital capability for low-income and homeless veterans. I could not agree more. Broadband allows veterans to participate more fully in our society and economy and to effectively manage the benefits they have earned through serving our country. Importantly, veterans also obtain better health care when they have broadband access – a recent study indicated that veterans with access to telehealth applications had significantly fewer hospital enrollments and bed days of care¹ – and broadband can help provide enhanced quality of life.

Your letter is extremely timely, as the Commission has already begun the process of updating its Lifeline rules. In June, the Commission sought comment on several ways to potentially increase veterans' access to the Lifeline program. *First*, the Commission sought comment on how to coordinate Lifeline outreach and enrollment efforts with the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program, or any other federal program designed to assist vulnerable veterans.² *Second*, the Commission sought comment on whether veterans and their families who are eligible for the Veterans Pension benefit should automatically qualify for

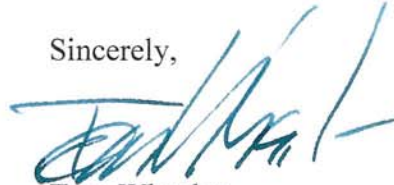
¹ Adam Darkins et al., *Care Coordination/Home Telehealth: The Systematic Implementation of Health Informatics, Home Telehealth, and Disease Management to Support the Care of Veteran Patients with Chronic Conditions*, 14 *Telemedicine and e-Health* 1118, 1118-26 (2008), <http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/pdf/10.1089/tmj.2008.0021> (last visited September 29, 2015).

² *Lifeline and Link Up Reform and Modernization*, et al., WC Docket No. 11-42 et al., Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, Order on Reconsideration, Second Report and Order, and Memorandum Opinion and Order, 30 FCC Rcd 7818, 7856, para. 102 (2015).

Lifeline support.³ *Finally*, the Commission sought comment on ways to increase the awareness of the Lifeline program to low-income veterans.⁴

As the Commission moves forward with its plan to modernize the Lifeline program, I look forward to finding ways to ensure that vulnerable veterans are aware of the Lifeline program and the benefits it can bring to their lives. I appreciate your interest in this matter. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,



Tom Wheeler

³ *Id.* at 7861, para. 115.

⁴ *Id.*